

VIETNAMESE AFFAIRS STAFF

OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

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DATE: 18 Nov 71

TO: The Director

FROM: GACarver, Jr.

SUBJECT:

Executive Registry

71-5806

REMARKS:

The attached merits your perusal.
It will provide some amusing diversion.
It will also tell you a great deal about
Cambodia.

George A. Carver, Jr.

Special Assistant for Vietnamese Affairs

Attachment

WALL STREET JOURNAL article,
18 November 1971

GAC

This is diverting.

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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, Thursday, November 18, 1971

In a Week of Crisis for Cambodia, An Elephant Makes Its Weight Felt

A Gift of 'Prosperity' Brings Woes to U.S. Government; Probing a Pachyderm's Past

By PETER R. KANN

Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

PHNOM PENH — Cambodia suffered twin crises this past week—both of them massive.

One involved Communist forces threatening the capital. The other involved an elephant named Chamroeu (Prosperity).

Chamroeu, a gift from Cambodian Prime Minister Lon Nol to American Adm. John S. McCain Jr., spent the week contentedly munching grass while Cambodia suffered through what may well have been its worst week since being engulfed in the Indochina war 18 months ago. The Americans, meanwhile, were trying to extricate the Cambodians from a military mess and Chamroeu from Phnom Penh. They finally succeeded at the latter.

On the military front, the week saw a 20,000-man Cambodian military column bogged down along Route 6, north of Phnom Penh, while North Vietnamese troops shredded three Cambodian battalions. The Communists cut practically all road links with the capital and then began rocketing its airport. Heavy fighting was going on less than 20 miles from Phnom Penh, and more enemy forces were reported moving toward the city.

Six Experts & an Elephant

On the elephant front, a six-man team of American elephant experts arrived here to arrange for Chamroeu's departure. The logistics of this would have proved difficult in normal circumstances, but the Communist offensive made the problems positively elephantine.

By the time Chamroeu was finally flown out of Phnom Penh on Tuesday, many observers had come to see irony in America's ability to mount a major logistical operation for an elephant while being politically constrained from providing greater support (if only air evacuation for wounded soldiers) for the beleaguered Cambodian army.

Other observers simply saw the Chamroeu affair as a welcome bit of diversion from too much Indochina tragedy.

But, comedy or black comedy, the Chamroeu affair was receiving the attention of prime ministers, ambassadors, generals and admirals and was very much a part of the week that was.

The lead in this drama is seven feet tall by seven feet long, weighs 2,000 pounds, is 20 years old and is still growing. He was presented to Adm. McCain, commander in chief of American forces in the Pacific, on the admiral's most recent visit here in September.

Cambodian elephants appear to have all-purpose symbolic significance, and so Chamroeu was given to the admiral in the name of friendship, prosperity, victory over communism, long life and peace. The admiral, who wasn't anticipating a gift of such symbolic or physical proportions, is said to have looked surprised.

Chamroeu is officially said to have been captured from a Vietcong unit operating near Phnom Penh in the early days of the Cambodian fighting. Diplomatic sources hint that Chamroeu actually was with a Kammer Rouge (Cambodian Communist) unit, but the political semantics of this war preclude publicizing the existence of ethnic Cambodian Communist forces (whose presence would indicate that the war has elements of civil conflict), and so Chamroeu is officially an ex-Vietcong elephant.

Enlisting the Elephants

Because of the geography of this war, which has the Communists controlling most of Cambodia's jungle and mountain regions, the majority of the country's elephant population—both wild and work-harnessed—appears to be with the enemy. The Communists recruit elephants like Chamroeu as supply porters. The Cambodians, like other Asian armies associated with America, prefer to move supplies by planes and trucks.

In any case, because Adm. McCain's gift, measured by ton or tusk, is worth more than \$50, it became U.S. government property, and it thus became incumbent on the government to claim it. Adm. McCain, from his headquarters in Honolulu, took personal command of the operation and arranged for Chamroeu to be sent to the Los Angeles Zoo. (Phnom Penh once had a small zoo of its own, consisting of two tigers and an elephant, but they were sold to an itinerant Soviet circus that passed through here in 1956. There was also a nice little zoo at Kampong Thom, about 100 miles north of Phnom Penh, but during last year's siege of that town most of the animals, said to include a lion but not an elephant, were eaten by the Cambodian garrison.)

After some weeks of planning by the Pacific command, the six-man elephant team arrived in Phnom Penh. It consisted of the director of the Los Angeles Zoo, his deputy, a military veterinarian, a logistics colonel, his sergeant and—of course—a public-relations officer. The American military-assistance program to Cambodia is handled by a group called the Military Equipment Delivery Team (MEDT), and so the elephant group was promptly, though unofficially, called McCain's Elephant Delivery Team (MEDT). MEDT inspected Chamroeu from all angles and pronounced him handsome, healthy and, most important, unusually gentle. MEDT then hired a local contractor, Ly Chhay, to construct an elephant crate of steel

Continued From Page One

military containers and plywood. Mr. Chhay initially was delighted at his \$450 contract, but his delight progressively waned.

He was asked to prepare the crate in 24 hours and at the end of this period he was found nervously puffing a cigaret while his 14 welders and carpenters scurried about the very unfinished crate.

"They tell me finish noon today. Twenty-four hours. How can? Work all day, all night, no sleep. Americans always hurry hurry. Very tired. How can?" said Mr. Chhay.

Forty-eight hours into the crate construction. Mr. Chhay, dark circles beneath his eyes, borrowed a cigaret and said: "Two days, two nights, no sleep. Very, very bad. Very tired. How can? Oh, very bad." But by the 72-hour mark Mr. Chhay, coughing and near collapse, had completed the job.

Meanwhile, out at Cambodian military headquarters, Chamroeum was placidly chewing a banana leaf in the shade of a defunct Soviet antiaircraft gun. Nearby, four Cambodian soldiers were struggling to push a quintessential Indochinese truck, lacking self-propulsion. They eyed the proximate elephant-power with ill-concealed envy and pushed on.

Chamroeum's handler, Private Second Class Proum Hun, 20, was standing by wondering if he would accompany his elephant to L.A. Private Hun had never had a photo taken and had heard that one needed a photo to enter America.

Proof of a Vietcong Background?

Private Hun generally agreed with the American consensus on the gentleness of Chamroeum but added that Chamroeum turned wild when approached by someone smelling of alcohol—a residual attitude, perhaps, from his former days with the puritanical Vietcong.

Chamroeum's first inkling that something was up probably came when MEDT tried to test a tranquilizer on him by stuffing a handful of pills into a loaf of French bread. Chamroeum tasted the loaf, removed it from his mouth with his trunk, shook it about until the pills dropped out and then swallowed it.

One of the Cambodian soldiers standing around Chamroeum happened to mention that "Nixon was given an elephant, too."

"The little fat elephant?" another soldier asked.

"Yeah. Why don't the Americans pick up Nixon's elephant?" the first soldier said.

"It's a funny elephant," the second said.

The official American community here appeared unaware that its President was also an elephant owner. A visit to the brigade headquarters where "Nixon's elephant" is quartered leaves the issue somewhat muddled. Indeed, there is a small, chubby elephant standing under a tree munching palm leaves. His name is Khaat, which means Little Frog. Khaat seems to be the property of a colonel named Oum Savuth, who attained a degree of fame some years back by ordering one of his soldiers to shoot a can of condensed milk off his head at 50 paces. The colonel is partially paralyzed as a result. This day he is off on operations.

His troops say the colonel wrote President Nixon a letter four months ago offering him the elephant, but they say no reply was received. And they wonder why an admiral's elephant should have higher priority than a President's. Mrs. Savuth, the colonel's wife, says she is pleased the President didn't respond to her husband's letter. "Giving away an elephant is bad luck," she explains.

A Good-Luck Elephant

But, then, isn't it bad luck for Prime Minister Lon Nol to give Adm. McCain an elephant? "That was a captured elephant, and giving away captured elephants brings good luck," she replies after some deliberation.

Phnom Penh's resident elephant expert is Sat Chheang, keeper of the ex-royal elephants at the ex-royal palace. (Cambodia became the Khmer Republic after the ouster of Prince Sihanouk in March 1970.) Mr. Chheang, a particularly phlegmatic Khmer, grants an interview as he reclines on his cot beside the stall of Sotun, a 70-year-old ex-royal elephant of enormous dimensions. Three years ago Sotun escaped from his stall, and the Cambodian army spent two days chasing him through the streets of Phnom Penh. Ever since, there has been a sign in French by Sotun's stall. It reads: "Attention elephant mechant"—or "Watch out for the naughty elephant."

So the reclining keeper of the ex-royal ele-

He is asked whether he has heard about the plans to send Adm. McCain's elephant to America.

"Yes."

What then does he think about it?

"Nothing much."

Does he consider it safe to send an elephant on an airplane?

"I do not know about airplanes, only about elephants."

Then what does he think of Chamroeum?

"Sort of small."

What type of elephant is Chamroeum?

"The small type."

Are there other types of Cambodian elephants?

"Yes."

What type are they?

"The big type."

At the conclusion of this interview Mr. Cheang notes that his elephants should no longer be called royal elephants but rather "republican elephants or governmental elephants."

The day Mr. Cheang imparted his knowledge was a Sunday, the same day that Chester Hogan, the Los Angeles Zoo director, had an audience with Lon Nol and conferred upon the prime minister an honorary life membership in the Los Angeles Zoo Society. It was also the same day the Communists began rocketing Phnom Penh airport, causing cancellation of all but tactical military flights.

The elephant flight, however, was still scheduled for Monday morning, and it was announced that an American Air Force C141 jet Starlifter would be arriving to move Chamroeum "through normal military airlift channels on a space-available basis."

On Monday morning MEDT was poised for action. At military headquarters Chamroeum grazed beside the completed crate while veterinarians, crane operators, truck drivers and various other logisticians sat waiting to swing into gear. Private Hun, suitcases packed and passport photo in order, was about as tense as Cambodians can seem to get. He had exchanged his rumpled military fatigues for a bell-bottom suit and had cut his shoulder-length hair to "American" crewcut style.

The Elephant That Wept

"Chamroeum is eating his last Cambodian grass," said one of the long-faced soldiers standing around.

"Chamroeum has been weeping," another soldier added. "We told him to write us a letter when he gets to America. We were just joking, but he became very sad."

"Then we told him America is very beautiful, and the food will be better there," a third soldier said. "But still he shed tears and cried and then he knelt down and prayed. Chamroeum is sad to leave Cambodia."

But, with all the logistics in order and all the tearful good-byes said, Chamroeum didn't depart. The Vietcong shelled the airport several more times on Monday, planes were canceled and elephants were stranded along with people.

MEDT went into conference with embassy and military officials. Various contingency plans were considered, including moving Chamroeum down the Mekong on a barge, trucking him to Thailand over insecure roads or slinging him under a giant helicopter and whisking him to Saigon. But in the end MEDT decided to sit tight.

On Tuesday morning, despite a predawn rocket attack, the Air Force Starlifter, with a little red elephant painted on its side, landed in Phnom Penh.

Chamroeum, mildly sedated by injection, was crated, hoisted, trucked and loaded—along with a supply of sugar cane and bananas for in-flight snacks. At 10:45 on a sunny day, Chamroeum, MEDT and Private Hun soared off toward Los Angeles (where the elephant arrived in good shape and was trucked to the zoo).

The American embassy here in Phnom Penh breathed a loud sigh of relief, and so probably did the Cambodians (though they are too polite to sigh loudly). All that remained of the Chamroeum crisis was a banana peel on the Pochentong runway.